



Making Sense of the Common Access Card

By Vicky Falcon, NAVAIR Public Affairs

August 1, 2001 - WASHINGTON (NNS) — As Aviation Electronics Technician 2nd Class Eric Emenhiser recently lined up inside a hangar at Naval Air Station Patuxent River, Md., to receive his Common Access Card (CAC), he couldn't help but be a little apprehensive.

In order to get his new identification card, Emenhiser, would need to give up his familiar green military identification card before leaving for his next duty station at Keflavik, Iceland.

"I was very nervous," Emenhiser said. "Sometimes change is good. Sometimes it doesn't make any sense."

Making sense of the CAC has been difficult at times. Ongoing computer network and server problems have caused delays in the issuance process across the country. Officials concede that the new card currently offers no additional capabilities, but they expect the developing technology behind the CAC will enhance the card's capabilities in the future.

So far, 28,000 CACs have been issued. The CAC is only being used for access to military bases, but several new features are expected in the near future.

According to Rob Carey, director of the Department of the Navy Smart Card Office (DONSCO), in the future the card will allow encryption of e-mail, digital signatures, access to secure Web sites and the use of a number of new Navy applications.

"We are not only issuing a new ID card, we are issuing a card that acts as a computer," Carey said. "This card is your passport to the e-world."

Individual stations will be able to choose what features of the card to use. According to Carey, the big push for CAC within the Navy is to support the security features of the Navy Marine Corp Intranet (NMCI).

After CAC is issued Navywide, the technology will be used to improve business processes, information assurance, mission effectiveness and quality of life.

As a result of the card, Naval Training Center Great Lakes, Ill., has seen significant cost savings, improved accountability for food services and recruit functions, and significant positive effects from streamlining their business practices.

Other "smart card" applications in use include food service, warrior readiness, manifest tracking, and weapons issuance.

"As the chip technology expands, the limits for new applications are boundless," Carey said.

The CAC features three forms of technology: the magnetic strip, the bar code and the computer chip. "As we migrate into a chip-based environment the need for the current magnetic strip and bar code will diminish," Carey said.

He added that, as chip technology develops, the Department of the Navy plans to use the CAC card as an access token to data, not as a storage card.

"The only information that will actually be stored on the card will be basic demographics and unique personnel benefit entitlements," Carey said.